



INSTITUTE FOR
PUBLIC RELATIONS

Help Stop the Spread of Disinformation!

A Guide and 10-Point Checklist to Help
People Think Before They Link



In August 2020, the Institute for Public Relations released its second annual “[IPR Disinformation in Society Report](#)” based on a survey of 2,200 Americans to find out the prevalence of disinformation, or “deliberately misleading or biased information” in the U.S. The report investigated the parties most responsible for sharing disinformation, the level of trust the American public has for different information sources, and whose job it is to combat disinformation.

One of the most significant effects of disinformation can be seen in the election process. In 2019, [a study by Oxford University](#) found evidence that organized social media manipulation campaigns have taken place in 70 countries, a 150% increase from when they started collecting data in 2017.

Federal intelligence and security agencies released a [joint statement](#) warning against the threat of “foreign malicious actors” using disinformation to interfere in the 2020 U.S. election. According to a [report](#) on safeguarding democracy, both foreign entities and domestic actors, including social media networks, help facilitate the spread of false or misleading content in a number of ways. These include selling microtargeted ads that leverage user data to spread disinformation, amplifying disinformation, and allowing participation from Trojan horse outlets which conceal their agenda and mimic news outlets.

Disinformation can fall under a number of different categories, according to [Groundviews](#). Some of these may include (visuals or text):

- **Manipulated content**
- **Misleading content**
- **Fabricated content**
- **Sponsored content**
- **Imposter content**

An [MIT study published in Science](#) found the top culprit for spreading disinformation is not bots, but us—we are responsible for false information amplification. In the recent [2020 IPR Disinformation in Society Report](#), at least 25% of respondents said the 32 sources listed were “very responsible” for combatting disinformation, including “people like me.”

So how can we stop the spread of disinformation?

One way is to take additional steps to **find out more** about the information or articles or posts we may share with others via word-of-mouth or through technology.

Advancements in technology have made it difficult for people to discern real posts, sites, or videos from fake ones. To help, IPR has created “*10 Ways to Identify Disinformation—A Checklist*” to help people **think before they link**.

A 10-POINT CHECKLIST TO HELP YOU



- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Who is the Author or Source? | <input type="checkbox"/> How Does It Make Me Feel? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> How Current is the Source? | <input type="checkbox"/> What is the Evidence? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Who Shared the Post? | <input type="checkbox"/> Could It Be a Joke? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Does the Headline Match the Content? | <input type="checkbox"/> Have I Verified It? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Does it Create Distrust or Sow Division? | <input type="checkbox"/> Do I Know Enough? |

1. Who is the author or source?

If the post* is from a **media outlet**, is it one that is well-known and trusted? Does the outlet have the ability or resources to access the claims made in the post? Is this an editorial or opinion piece? How objective is the source? To find out the objectivity of media outlets, *Ad Fontes Media* offers a [media bias chart](#).



If a source falls on the ends of either side of the bias scale, then **think before you link**.

Some sites are imposter or fake sites with professional sounding URLs, imposter logos, or profile pictures.



If the post is from an **organization**, what do they do? Do they actually exist? Are they partisan? Can you find out more information about them on their site? Is there information about the owners or staff who run the site, and is their contact information available?



If you cannot find information about the individuals managing the organization or there is no contact information, then **think before you link**.

If the post is from a **person**, find out more about that individual. Are they an expert? If the source is well-known, take additional steps to make sure they actually wrote or said it.

For example, if an actor is quoted in a meme, then go to a reliable search engine to confirm if they actually said it. If the person is on social media, but you don't personally know them, then go to their page to verify if they are indeed a real person or a bot. You can also insert their profile picture into a [Google reverse image search](#) to see if it is a bot account.

** Disinformation may be found in posts, articles, videos, ads, graphs, images, and memes. We will refer to all these as posts.*

Lastly, think about the motivations of the source for posting the content. How biased are they and what is their intent? How are they funded?



If a source is ***anonymous or unknown***, then **think before you link**. Bad actors hide behind their anonymity to post.

Double check the profile name or URL. Imposter accounts will add an additional letter or number to a reputable name or organization so the name looks similar.



If an image search for a profile picture turns up multiple accounts using the same profile pictures with different names, this is a bot.

If a social media account was recently created or only has recent posts, then this most likely is a bot.



2. How current is the source?

Check when the post was published. This will help you determine if it is relevant to today. Sometimes old disinformation gets recirculated.

3. Who shared this source?

What do you know about the person or organization who shared the source? What is their motivation for sharing? If the person who shared the post is a family member or friend, take additional steps to verify the original source's accuracy before you share it.

4. Does the headline match the content?

Some individuals or companies will post headlines or “click-bait” that do not accurately reflect the content of the article. Before you share, read the article and assess its validity.



If the headline is misleading, then think before you link as some who will see your post may not click to read the article.

5. Are the topics trying to create division or distrust?

Disinformation attempts to increase polarization, division, and distrust among groups.

According to [Claire Wardle of First Draft](#), a nonprofit focused on fighting misinformation, the following topics were the most common for disinformation leading to the U.S midterm elections:

- Attempts to undermine the integrity of the election system
- Attempts to sow hate and division based on misogyny, racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and homosexuality
- Attempts to demonize immigrants
- Conspiracies about global networks of power



If the post is related to one of these four topics, then **think before you link.**

6. How did the post make you feel?

If the post or article makes you really excited or angry, is this the intent of the source? Are your own beliefs affecting your judgment? Many disinformation campaigns try to trigger an emotional response to increase its shareability. Additionally, if the source is sponsored in your news feed, you may see it because the platform has sold your data to a third party.

Be careful of sources who try to “guilt” people into sharing, such as “share if you agree” or “I bet this can’t get X number of shares.” They do this to extend the reach of disinformation.



7. What evidence supports the claim?

What research exists or evidence supports the claims made in the post? If people make claims, but no evidence exists otherwise, then be careful about sharing the source. Claims should be verified by external sources, such as hyperlinks to the original source and citations.



If the post is making claims that aren’t backed by additional sources, then **think before you link.**

8. Does it sound like a joke?

Satirical sources such as *The Onion* can fool readers. Some sites may not be transparent about being for entertainment purposes only.



If sometimes a source sounds too outlandish to be true, it may be disinformation.

9. Have you verified the information?

Here's how to do it:

- If it is not a reputable source, go to a search engine and verify the content through an additional trusted source.
- Did anyone else report something similar, but from a different perspective? If not, then it may be disinformation.
- See if any other reputable fact-checking organizations such as *Politifact*, *Factcheck.org*, or *Snopes* have looked into the claim.
- If the source is a video or a video compilation, how confident are you that it has not been altered or material taken out of context?
- Look for warning signs that would put into question the integrity of the content. If a doctor wearing a white coat is featured on a video, for example, check his or her credentials to make sure they are a reputable practicing doctor. Also, if they go against the overall opinion of a group of trusted sources (such as scientists), then you should take additional steps to verify the source.

10. “Do I really know enough to share this?”

Finally, do you know enough about the topic to share the information? Will this help inform people or help them make decisions? If you are unsure, it may be wise not to share.

If you have shared a post and realize later it contains disinformation, please correct the post itself (rather than insert the comments as people may not read them). Additionally, you can put a red “X” through the article to make people aware.

To learn more about disinformation and how to spot it, please read the full 2020 IPR Disinformation in Society report at <https://instituteforpr.org/2020-disinformation-report/>.

For more research about disinformation, please visit the IPR Research Library at <https://instituteforpr.org/category/disinformation/>